

Interview Profile: Dr. Ellen Ruth Gritz, Ph.D.
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This interview of Dr. Ellen Ruth Gritz (b. 9 April 1944) is conducted in three sessions. The first two take place in a conference room at the Department of Behavioral Science at Houston's University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center; the third is conducted on the telephone. The conference room is filled with Dr. Gritz's professional awards as well as photographs of her home-cultivated orchids, her beloved cats, and scenes from scuba-diving trips with her husband, Mickey Rosenau. Dr. Gritz speaks about her career as a behavioral psychologist with an international reputation in smoking cessation and the psycho-social dimensions of cancer. She is currently a Professor and Chair of the Department of Behavioral Science (a department she was recruited to found). She also holds the Olla S. Stribling Distinguished Chair for Cancer Research at the M.D Anderson Cancer Center. She won the Alma Dea Morani Renaissance Woman in Medicine Award in 2008. The interview runs just over five hours; the first two sessions took place on 3 and 4 February 2009; the telephone session was conducted on 17 March 2009. Tacey A. Rosolowski, Ph.D. is the interviewer.

During the first hour, Dr. Gritz notes that she couldn't have predicted her successful career and that her path evolved through "coincidences and random opportunities." Of a Polish-immigrant background, she was the first person in her family to attend college, though young Ellen's fantasies of becoming a veterinarian were balanced by the belief that she would marry and stay at home to have children. Dr. Gritz describes attending programs for gifted students and her stellar education at Barnard College, Columbia University, where she received her BA in Psychology in 1964. She notes that she was quite traditional and traces her growing independence through her first job (Bell Laboratories, New Jersey) and the newly founded graduate program at the University of California San Diego-La Jolla (PH.D. conferred, 1971): both introduced her to egalitarian-minded (male) mentors and guided her to work on the addictive nature of tobacco. Mentors continued to play a role as she moved into research positions at the Johnsson Comprehensive Cancer Center at UCLA. She met her husband in California (they married in 1975). In the second hour she describes how his (successful) battle with testicular cancer opened a new professional interest in the family dynamics of cancer. Dr. Gritz is very candid about her strategies for handling the stress of a life-threatening illness. The day's session closes with her discussion of the discovery that, despite her national reputation, she was being paid much less than colleagues at other institutions.

Dr. Gritz begins the session on the 4th of February with reflections on feminism. She then describes how she was recruited to join the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center (in 1993) in order to create the Department of Behavioral Science. She confronted a basic challenge: physicians needed to be convinced that psychologists could provide tools to support cure and prevention. She also touches on the atmosphere for women at Medical Center at that time and notes that she joined the newly-formed Women Faculty Committee to work for gender equity. In the second half of the session, she discusses her passionate commitment to the Faculty Health Project, a project she helped create in response to a physician's suicide. The Project advocates for a balanced life and Dr. Gritz lives this commitment. She describes the importance of her friends, her love of nature and the yearly scuba-diving trips she and her husband make to Indonesia, and her favorite hobby, cultivating orchids. Dr. Gritz concludes this session with reflections on how the field of medicine has changed for women.

Dr. Gritz begins the hour-long telephone session with a discussion of her work with the American Legacy Foundation and the pleasure she took in working on boards composed of professionals from many different fields. (She eloquently describes the leadership skills of Christine Gregoire, a member of the ALF and now governor of Washington State.) Dr. Gritz then describes her work in several areas: genetic testing, building awareness of how children must be protected from the sun as a cancer-prevention measure, and the “cell-phone intervention project,” an innovative cancer cessation project being conducted with HIV-AIDS patients. Dr. Gritz talks about the importance of building “transdisciplinary work” in an era when physicians are overloaded with advances in technology and basic research and lack time to broaden their expertise in how lifestyle and family influence disease. At the close of the interview, she speaks again about her belief in the important of balance: serving as a model of a balanced life is one legacy she feels she leaves.

Dr Gritz is an extraordinarily articulate woman with important insights into the experience of women professionals and the changing relationship between social science and medical practice and thought.